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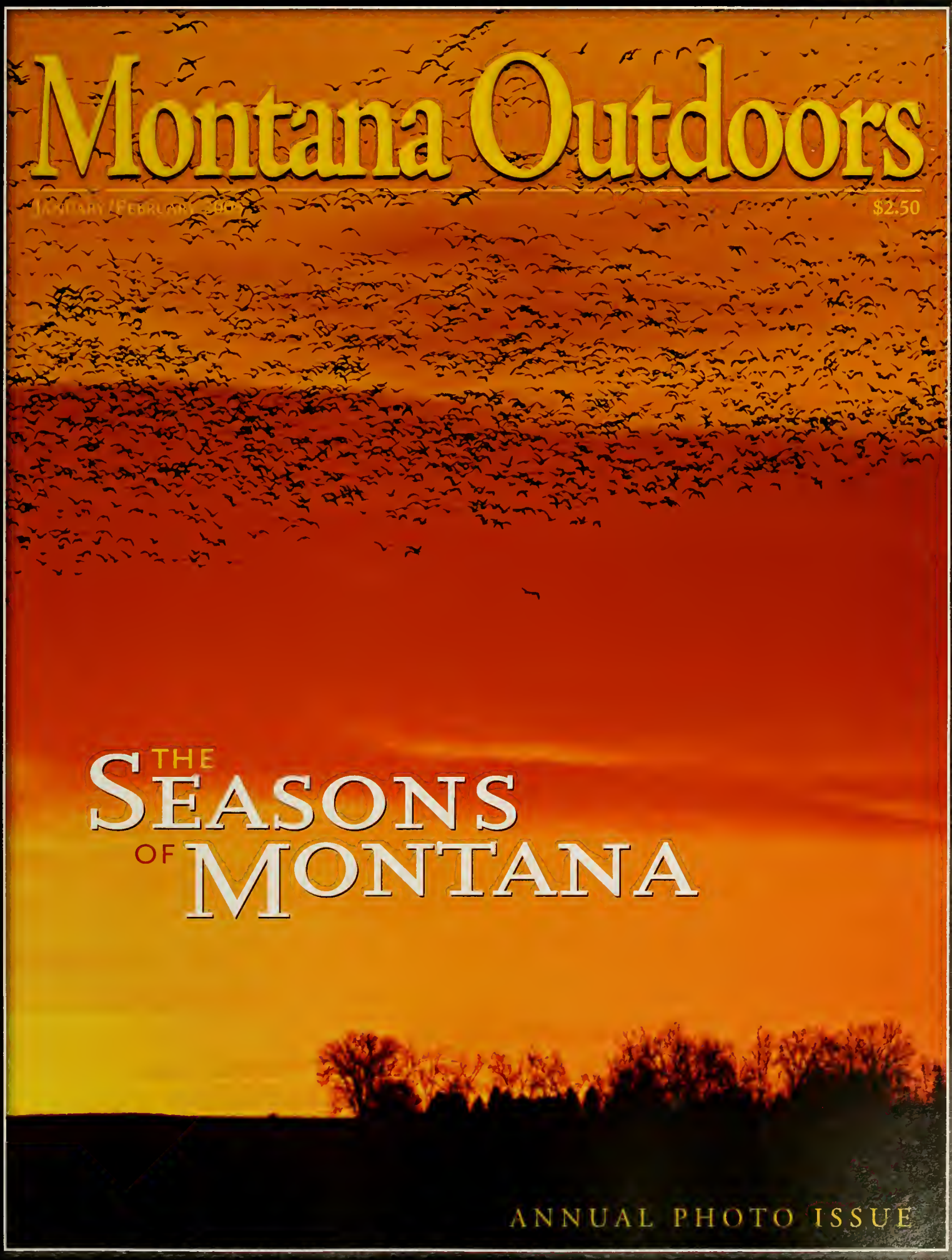

THE SEASONS OF MONTANA

ANNUAL PHOTO ISSUE

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Live each season as it passes;
Breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit,
And resign yourself to the influences of each.

—Henry David Thoreau

It's common in most parts of the country for residents to boast of their capricious climate. "If you don't like the weather around here," they'll tell you, "just wait five minutes and it'll change."

On a continent buffeted by Pacific Ocean warmth, arctic cold fronts, and moist Gulf air, rapid weather transformations are common. But few places in North America have such abrupt and severe weather changes as in Montana. Temperatures in the Northern Rockies can plummet 30 degrees in just a few minutes, while in the state's eastern half, the prairie sun quickly transforms pleasantly cool mornings into scorching hot afternoons. Montana holds the record for the coldest temperature in the lower 48 states—minus 70 degrees Fahrenheit, recorded on January 20, 1954, along the Rocky Mountain Front not far from Helena. Montana's record high came in 1937 when the mercury climbed to 117 degrees at Medicine Lake in the state's far northeastern corner.

The only plus of these wide meteorological fluctuations is that they delineate the four seasons. Winter here is cold and snowy, summer is hot and dry, spring is mild and relatively wet, and autumn—well, to many of us this season is blessed no matter what the weather.

If the calendar and thermometer aren't enough to identify the season, there are plenty of other clues familiar to those who spend time outdoors. The blaze orange of hunters signals the start of fall, while winter becomes official when ice anglers fire up their augers. Spring is announced when trillium and pasqueflowers nudge their way up through melting snow, and a sure sign of summer is when out-of-state SUVs begin filling up fishing access sites along Montana trout rivers.

Another seasonal indicator is this, our annual photography issue. As we have each winter for the past 24 years, we celebrate in pictures some of Montana's most beautiful natural wonders. It's our yearly reminder of just how much this state has to offer. And why Montanans continue to care for the forests, grasslands, rivers, fish, wildlife, and parks that make this such a wonderful place to live and visit.

In a state renowned for fluctuating temperatures and climatic extremes, let's hope Montana's long tradition of stewardship is one thing that never changes.

—Tom Dickson, Editor

Cover: Migrating snow geese fill the autumn sky over a farmstead near Freezout Lake. Judy Wanttor

Left: A mule deer buck puzzles over a camera-toting intruder. Donald M. Jones

Above right: Indian paintbrush in full bloom. Andy Long

Winter

Above: Small but rapacious, a pygmy owl feeds on its prey. Steven Gnam

Far right: A mob of Bohemian waxwings attacks a mountain ash. Donald M. Jones

Right: A sharp-tailed grouse stays clear of foxes and other ground predators by roosting in a Russian olive. Liz Lewis

Right: A stalk of smooth bromegrass bends under the weight of ice crystals. Diane Burton

Far right: Though crowded in midsummer, the banks of Holter Reservoir at Black Sandy State Park are empty on a chilly winter morning. Alan Ha

Below right: In the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, winter mountain moisture covers conifers with an icy coat to create "snow ghosts." David R. Brandt

Below left: A coyote's tracks cross shapely snow dunes. John Lambing

Left: Held in place by just a few points of steel, a climber carefully ascends an ice wall near Trego. Heath A. Korvola

Above: Comfortably seated and fully insulated, an ice angler casually jigs for rainbow trout on a frozen impoundment of the Missouri River. Craig & Liz Larcom

Right: With live geese fast approaching, a hunter races from his decoy set to a blind on the banks of the Yellowstone River near Huntley. Gary Leppart

Frozen before they could fall, water droplets cling to tiny icicles lining the bank of a small mountain stream. Ron Boggs

A fiery sunrise illuminates Trapper Peak, the highest point in the Bitterroot Mountains. Mike Veich

Spring

Newly emerging trillium search for sunlight near St. Regis. Ron Boggs

A newly hatched sandhill crane waits for its mother to return with food. Dušan Smetana

Above left: A Merriam's wild turkey hen leads her poults from a sunny field to the safety of shade. Gary Leppart

Above right: Looking for playmates, a gray wolf pup peers over a lichen-encrusted rock. Jeffrey Rich

Left: A grizzly cub amuses itself in an alpine meadow. Barbara Thomas

Left: Two massive cedars at Ross Creek near Troy create an inviting forest entryway. David R. Bennett

Above: Dawn light colors Makoshika State Park and the surrounding sky in shades of purple and blue. Dave Sharpe

Below: As storm clouds pass overhead, the emerging sun illuminates a cottonwood stand on a pond near Bozeman. E.J. Butler

Left: Mushrooms of the genus *Cortinarius* emerge from moss in northwestern Montana. Steven Akre

Above: Northern oak ferns cover the forest floor near Mystic Lake, in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. Ward M. Thurman

Right: A Columbia spotted frog peers out from a mountain pond. Ian Shive

Below: Yellowstone cutthroat trout spawn over gravel in a small stream. Michael L. Haring

Summer

Left: A grasshopper soaks in the sun amid a field of sunflowers. Dušan Smetana

Below: A pale evening dun prepares to take flight from a raft along the lower Yellowstone River. Liz Lewis

Above: A twelve-spotted skimmer dragonfly pauses briefly from its energetic flight. Mike Anich

Right: A mountain goat kid tastes what will soon be sticking up from its own head. Michael L. Haring

Below: At the base of lupine leaves, a drop of morning dew rests. Daniel J. Cox

Left: An angler mends her line to get a drag-free drift on DePuy's Spring Creek in the Paradise Valley. Denver Bryan

Above: What looks like a bumblebee is actually a clear-winged sphinx moth feeding on vegetation. Jeff Van Tine

Right: The remains of mining and smelting equipment still stand in the ghost town of Albright, part of Sluice Boxes State Park. Jeff Erickson

Below: Dressed in period attire, musicians entertain visitors during the Bannack Days celebration at Bannack State Park. Jim Herrly

Left: Its massive antlers covered in velvet, a bull elk pauses for a drink. Rodney Schlecht

Above: Like a setting from *The Lord of the Rings*, a waterfall plunges over red Proterozoic sedimentary rock along Reynolds Creek, in Glacier National Park. Bob Kurzenhauser

Left: Smoke from a forest fire looms over McGee Meadow in Glacier National Park. Rosanna M. Bradford

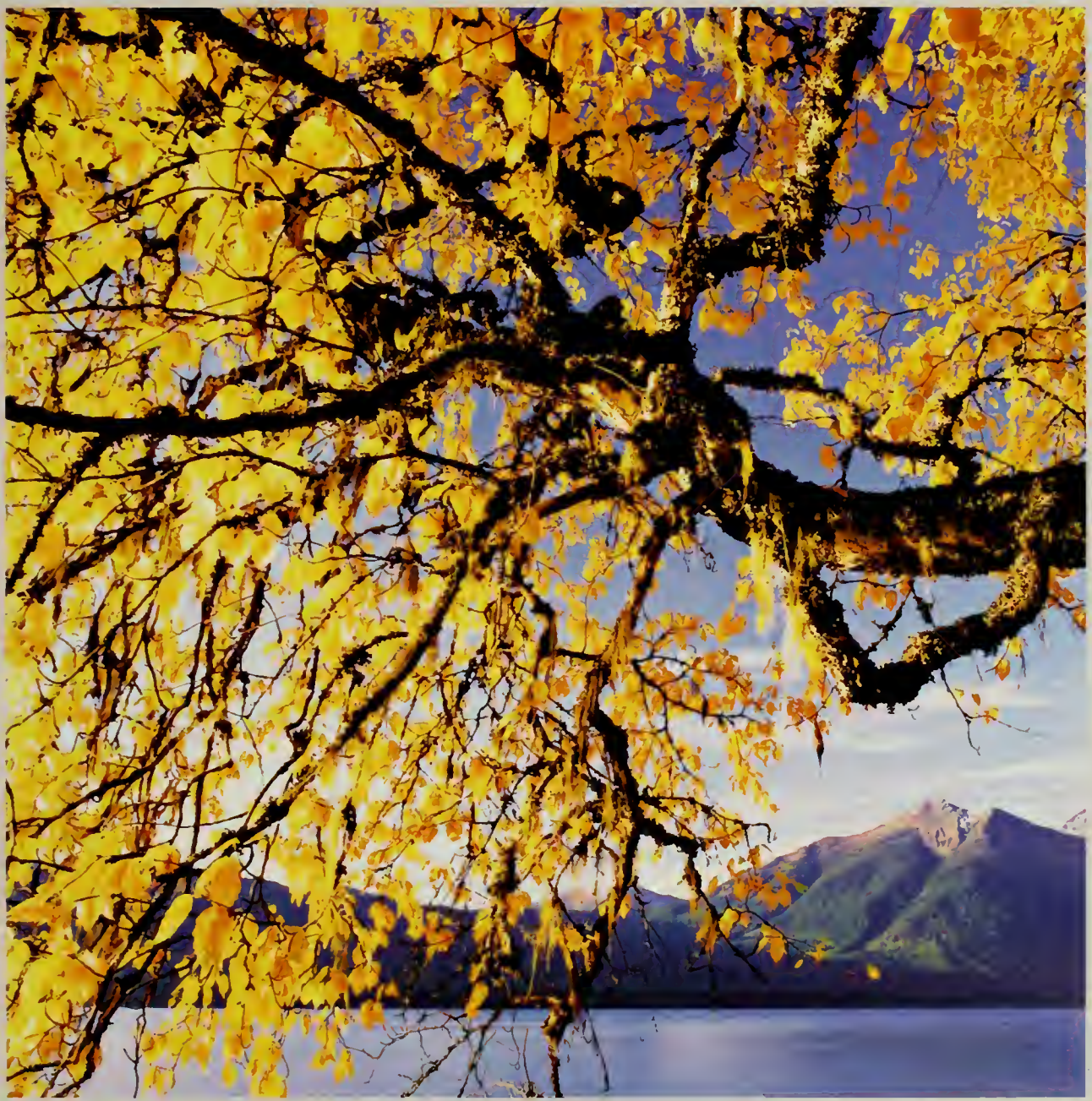
Above: A red inferno glows near Missoula. Michael J. Wolf

Fall

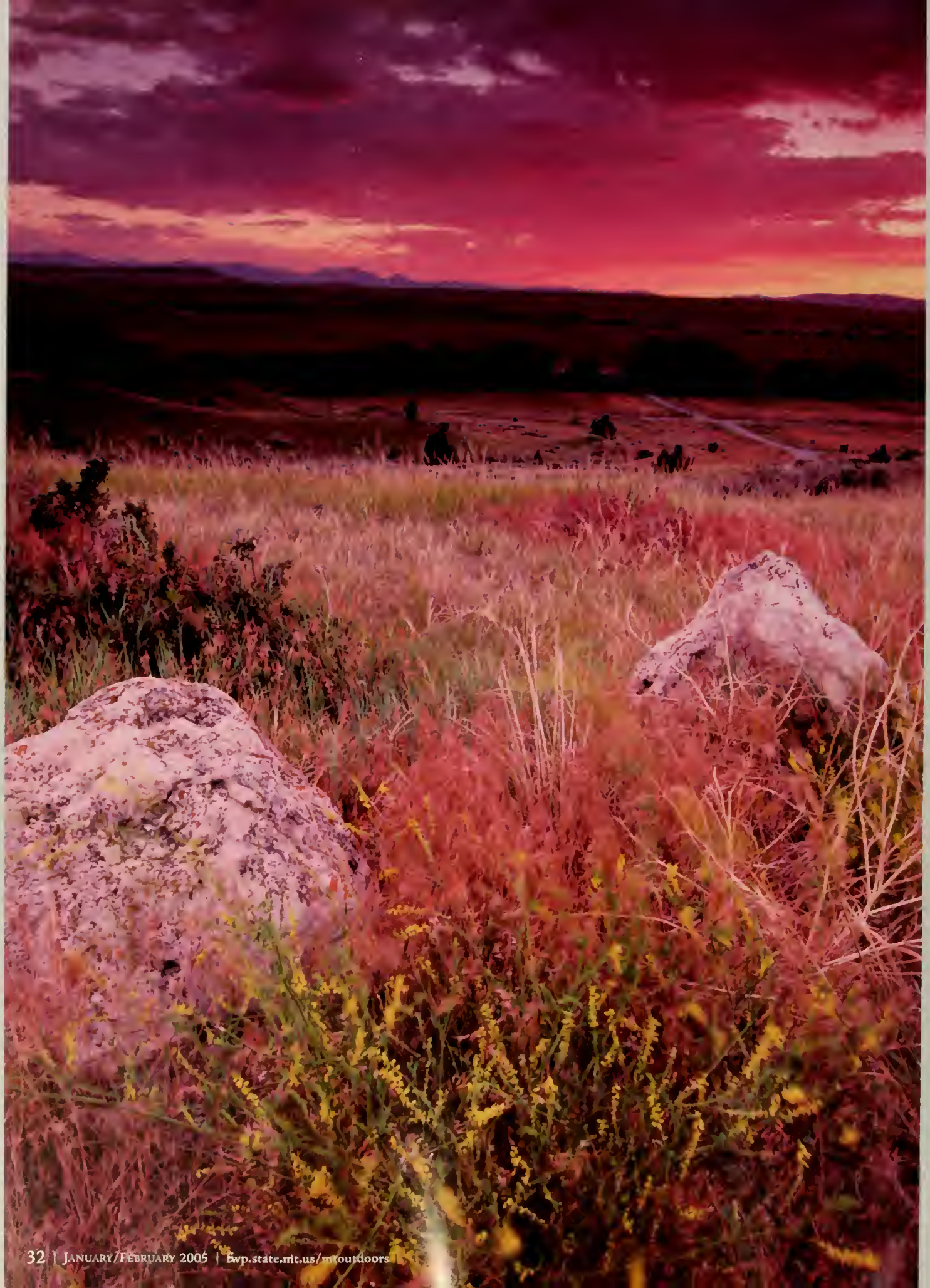
Above: Near Fort Benton, a hunter awaits Canada geese from the nearby Missouri River. Craig & Liz Dalton

Right: True to its name, a pointer indicates where an upland bird is hiding. Dale C. Spartas

McDonald Creek in Glacier National Park hums with color and motion. CHUCK HANEY



With Japanese-like elegance, the golden leaves of a birch tree frame Lake McDonald and Stanton Mountain in Glacier National Park. JOHN LAMBING



Left: The setting sun bathes Madison Buffalo Jump State Park in lavender light. Tim Cady

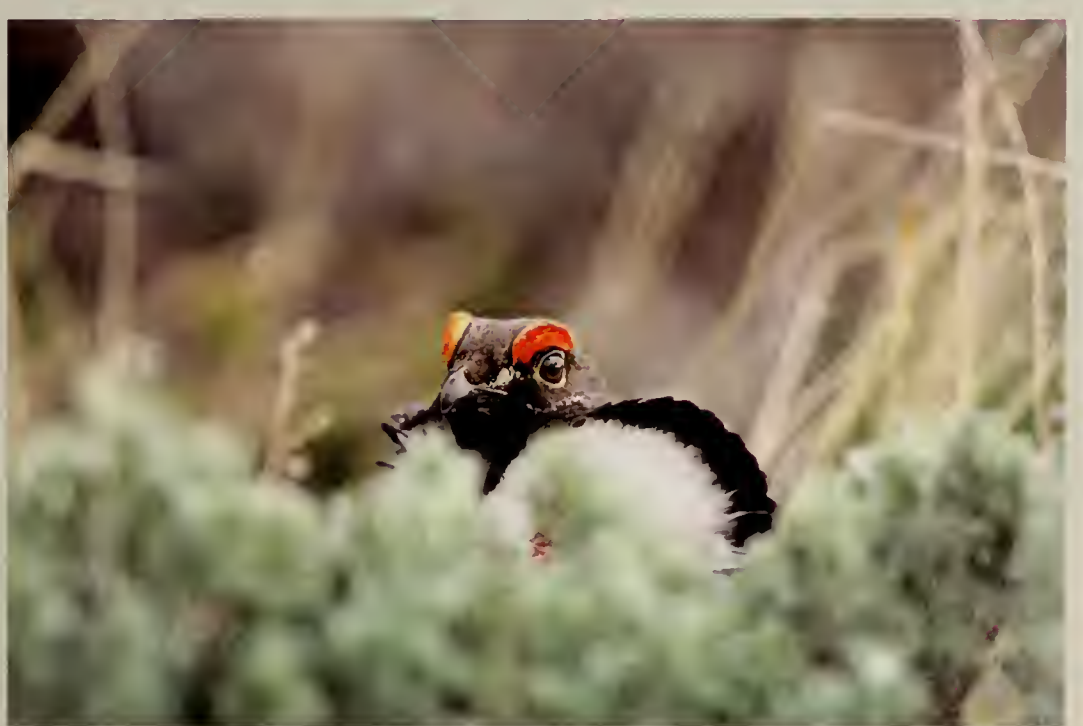
Above right: A red quaking aspen leaf holds still for a moment. Dea Vogel

Right: An aspen leaf's fall is interrupted by a pine branch. Dusan Smetana

Left: Gaudy as Las Vegas, a rooster pheasant is hard to miss as it stands along an eastern Montana roadside. Alan G. Nelson

Above: After its lumbering takeoff, a sage grouse flies over an eastern Montana grassland. Donald M. Jones

Right: Colorful eye combs reveal a male blue grouse hiding along a mountain ridge. Gary Leppart



Left: Weathered teeth and a chewed jawbone are all that remain of an elk. NELSON KENTER

Below: A mule deer shed lies among sandstone in the Missouri River Breaks. RODNEY SCHIECHL

Visitors to the ghost town at Elkhorn State Park, near Boulder, are reminded that life could be harsh, and tragically short, for Montana's early pioneers. Jeff Henry

SCHOOL'S OUT

In 1874 the Masons fraternal organization teamed up with local education advocates to build this combination school (ground floor) and Masonic Lodge (second floor) at Bannack, today a state park. Students filed in and out the front doors until 1951, when the school finally had to close for lack of pupils.

PHOTO BY MIKE ANICH.

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